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007's Last Minutes

By Seymour M. Hersh

All must have seemed normal aboard the aircraft. Ninety minutes after takeoff and about 700 miles from Anchorage, Korean Air routine called for the stewardesses to change into their native dress. Snacks and orange juice and sandwiches were served to tourist passengers (those in first class were provided with more elegant fare), and then it would be time once again for another in-flight movie. In another 90 minutes, with cabin lights turned off and window shades down, Flight 007 flew into the range of Soviet radar; 30 minutes later it penetrated Soviet airspace.

Flight 007, now more than 200 miles off course and constantly moving away, flew over the Sea of Okhotsk for more than an hour, and its crew members continued to make what they thought were appropriate weather and position reports at the usual time to air traffic control officials in Anchorage and Tokyo. Those officials took no notice of the inappropriate weather reports — such reports are routine at best and, with that discrepancy unremarked, there was no reason for those officials to have any concern about the flight, and none did.

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One heat-seeking missile is believed to have struck the passenger plane's left wing, destroying engines number one and two and triggering a fire. The second missile, which may have been radar-guided, perhaps homed in on the airliner's tail, ripping apart the auxiliary power unit and causing all of the pressurized air in the passenger compartment to rush into the tail. The sudden surge of pressure could have blown apart the tail structure and ruptured hydraulic, fuel and electric lines. It took twelve minutes for Flight 007 to spiral its way to the waters north of Maneron Island and crash. When hit, the airliner was 365 nautical miles off course.

The attack came at a time when passengers would be asleep, or trying to sleep; the last 12 minutes of flight could only have been agonizing. The cabin, whether directly hit or penetrated by missile fragments, would immediately lose air pressure and would begin turning cold; some passengers, still strapped into their seats, may have been killed outright by shrapnel or debris as others watched terror-stricken.

Those who suffered the most would be the ones who survived the first moments. The cabin would fog as the drop in air density caused the water vapor in the air to precipitate immediately. Within seconds the airliner's air-conditioning units, reacting to the sudden drop in temperature, would begin pumping heat into the cabin. Many of the passengers, protected by blankets and breathing through oxygen masks, would have survived the initial missile impact — and the descent to the sea — knowing that they were going to their death.

The crew members in the cockpit would be equally helpless as they vainly tried to cope with cabin decompression, power failure, and the incipient collapse of many — if not all — of the airplane's systems. Within seconds, the plane began whirling down to the Sea of Japan. It would be almost impossible to think clearly. The crew's report to Tokyo air traffic control, the last known message from Flight 007, was received 48 seconds after the missile struck. Not surprisingly, the crew's indistinct message indicated no immediate awareness that the aircraft had been struck by a military missile.

Seymour M. Hersh is a journalist who has reported for The New York Times. This is adapted from his forthcoming book "The Target Is Destroyed."